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ABSTRACT

Because of the pressures of modernization and other cultural factors, freshmen students at the University of the Sacred Heart in Puerto Rico lack basic communication skills in both Spanish and English. At present, there is no composition course in Spanish at the college, and the basic Spanish textbook currently in use reflects attitudes on language and composition that are ill-suited to present circumstances. A basic composition course in Spanish will help students to generate ideas, write complete and coherent essays, develop a richer vocabulary, and think critically. This course will involve practice, lots of private writing, collaborative learning processes, peer revisions, and multiple drafts, as well as more traditional methods such as dictation and copying passages from good authors. (JL)

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COMPOSITION COURSES IN SPANISH: REVOLUTION OR REFORM?

by

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COMPOSITION COURSES IN SPANISH: REVOLUTION OR REFORM?

The University of the Sacred Heart in Puerto Rico offers educational opportunities to a large number of students who traditionally had not considered post-secondary education as a viable alternative towards career selection. With the assistance of remedial programs and federal aid, increasing number of Puerto Rican students are able to attend higher education institutions. However, a large percentage of these students come to the university with serious educational deficiencies, particularly in verbal and written communication skills. Most of our students graduate from the public school system, which unlike in the United States is a highly centralized system. The school are chronically overcrowded and teachers for the most part rely on objective tests to evaluate students. Rarely are students asked to produce written materials. Thus upon entering college, students find difficulty in expressing themselves in a smooth coherent manner.

In Puerto Rico, the problem of language skills is twofold. First of all, the medium of instruction and native language is Spanish, but because of our political relationship with the United States, a working knowledge of English is imperative for most employment opportunities. English is taught from grade one to high school and is a general education requirement in all institutions of higher learning. Nevertheless, in spite of the great amount of money and effort invested in the English

language program by the Department of Education, results have been very disappointing, to say the least. So, upon entering their freshman year, most students are seriously lacking in the basic communication skills, both in Spanish and in English.

When I came to Beaver I thought that our problem was somehow unique, but I have found out here that, aside from the dual language factor, the problem of language skills exists in varying degrees in almost every university or college in the States. All of us share the concern for our students' lack of preparation to enter the academic community and we are all searching for ways to remedy this situation.

In our institution, as in many others, discussions about language skills among faculty members almost always end up in a criticism of the basic language courses, both in English and in Spanish, but particularly of the Spanish course. (As one of the philosophy teachers told a group of English teachers who were sharing the hair-raising experience of correcting essays. "You poor benighted fools! How do you expect these kids to express themselves correctly in English when they don't even know their own language?")

Dissatisfaction with the basic Spanish course led to a revision of the course three or four years ago. A new text was written by a group of Spanish professors and is currently in use.[1] The text is based on the new grammar directives published by the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language in 1973. Although simplified, the text is still highly technical. It

begins with a short history of the origin and development of the Spanish language, followed by notions of etymology, semantics, phonology, spelling, morphology and syntaxis. It then has a discussion of the parts of speech and finally, in the last five pages, some notions of composition.

This text reflects the profound knowledge and appreciation of the Spanish language and culture of its authors, but it has not proven effective in developing and reinforcing language skills. Due to the size of our average freshman classes (45 students), written exercises and essays are out of the question. All tests are objective and most of them are corrected by computer.

The students then, don't get a chance to write for the Spanish teacher, and when they have to write for other courses, the terminology learned in basic Spanish doesn't go a long way in helping them solve the problem of addressing the question or topic of discussion nor to express themselves clearly, coherently and to the point. The problem was considered so serious that last year an interdepartmental committee was organized to study all aspects of the problem and make recommendations to the Dean of Academic Affairs.

In the meantime, some members of the Humanities Department had been discussing the desirability of having a writing course in Spanish. We debated what the course would include and what we expected to accomplish with such a course. It was at this point that we learned about the NEH Writing Institute. The

opportunity seemed to us heaven-sent. I applied with the full backing of our Department head and of the Dean of Academic Affairs, submitting as my project the designing of a basic composition course in Spanish.

While preparing my project, I had a nagging question in the back of my mind. I had never taken a writing course in all my years as a Spanish major. I couldn't find a basic composition textbook in Spanish. None of our universities offered basic composition courses in Spanish. Why?

The question became more insistent as I followed Peggy Horodowich's lightning survey of the history of Rhetoric. At some point along the way --the XVIII century, as far as I could determine-- our paths had diverged. The question of why we don't have basic composition courses led to another one: What do we understand by composition in Spanish?

I went back to our basic Spanish textbook and looked up the definition for composition. Having been immersed for three weeks in the perspective of writing as a process of discovery and learning, the textbook's definition seemed to me to be redundant, mechanistic, and what's more, it seemed to put the cart before the horse. I tried to translate it and couldn't find exact equivalents for the words. To a professional translator this is nothing new. We know we don't translate words, but ideas and different views of the world, and therein lies the difficulty in transferring thoughts from one language to another; you can't divorce language from culture.

Before I go on, I would like to give you a very literal translation of the definition of composition as it appears in our textbook under the heading, Modes of Composition:

> The art of composition is achieved by means of the written expression. Composition, or placing in order, consists of expressing previously ordered thoughts in writing. To write is to combine words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs in order to state, in a beautiful and harmonious way, the ideas that have been thought out, so that they can be properly understood.

If I were to analyze the definition from this workshop's view of writing, I would quarrel with almost every part of it. For instance, the notion of composition as an art. Does that mean art as a mysterious God-given talent that can't be learned, or as Richard Young proposed,[2] an ability acquired through experience and through observation of people who have a knack for writing. The concept of previously ordered thoughts and of a beautiful harmonious way seemed to me intimidating. It would mean a finished and polished product literally out of the top of one's head.

There were other objections to the definition, but I think these are sufficient. At this point I decided I needed someone with whom to talk this out. I called Dr. Marshall Morris, Director of the Honors Program at the University of Puerto Rico and a former teacher of mine in the Graduate School of translation in that institution. I explained my project and the

work I was doing in this Institute and the question that had risen out of the translation. He very patiently heard me out and after discussing all these issues briefly, he suggested I go back to the definition and look at it in its context. His parting words were, "You know Myrsa, what you want to do is nothing short of revolution".

I did as he suggested and looked at the definition again in its context: a grammar textbook written in the tradition of the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language, the institution that has presided over Spanish Language, the institution that has presided over Spanish letters for two centuries. Against this background, the definition was perfectly congruent with the rest of the text and with our whole literary tradition. This concept of composition as the expression of well-constructed thought is bound up with the Academy's zeal to maintain the purity of our language. There is a 'right' way to speak and write. It is a definition based on the finest belle-letrist tradition.

This traditional way of teaching writing has been a part of the study of our language for a long time. We learned by reading the great masters. We wrote striving for clear thinking, correctness of language and elegance of style. This method was effective for a long time. But time and circumstances change and what was effective until the 50's or the 60's has ceased to be so.

Why did this happen? I really don't know. I could venture some considerations, such as the population explosion after

World War II, overcrowding in the schools or cultural shock from increased contact with American values as a result of television and industrialization. The facts are that previous generations of students learned the basic language skills in secondary schools, even rural ones, such as the one my father attended. They learned Spanish and English, geography, mathematics, science. You could drop a literary or historical allusion and it didn't fall flat on its face. Those generations brought to the university a cultural baggage graduating students today would be hard-pressed to match.

So there was my answer. We never had a composition course because we didn't need one. Our students were familiar with the tradition of love for our language. They wrote for all their courses and they had to meet high standards or at least strive for them according to their measure.

All that, however, is past history. The pressures of modernization have taken their toll. The students that face us each semester are a product of their generation; we don't see the world in the same terms. What we hold precious they reject as useless. Even simple communication becomes difficult. We are turning into a nation of stutterers. In aspiring to become bilingual due to economic pressures --while underestimating the importance of basic language skills-- we are in danger of becoming 'alingual'.

How can we re-establish communication with our student? How can we bridge this gap? This is the challenge now.

Nostalgia won't help, but a composition course might be a first step. If I were to make a list of the most common complaints about our students, it would go something like this: they don't know how to think, they can't talk, they can't write, they answer questions with "I know what you're asking, but I don't know how to say it", they never come to the point, they can't read, they don't know how to take notes, they don't know how to study.

My project, as I have told you, is to develop a basic composition course in Spanish. This course will help in the following areas: It will help them to generate ideas, after all none of them is pathologically unable to think. The problem is they have never been asked to think on their own. They have been stuffed by facts which they use to fill blanks and to make selection in multiple choice tests. Since they are almost never asked essay questions, they haven't had much practice in organizing ideas. Both their speech and their writing are frequently unconnected and unfinished, full of verbal crutches. They have difficulty expressing their thoughts because they don't have enough vocabulary. They don't know how to find the main ideas in their readings because they don't have practice in critical thinking.

The course will give them practice in all these areas. It will consist mainly of expository writing. They will learn as experienced writers do: by practice, lots of private writing, collaborative learning processes, peer revisions and multiple drafts. The techniques and methods to be used will come out

of the wealth of offerings we have been exposed to in this Institute. Lest I be misunderstood, let me make it clear that I will also use some of the more traditional methods, such as dictation and copying passages from good authors. That will be my work for the next semester.

I am not so naive as to expect my colleagues from the Spanish Department to accept the idea right away. They might view the course as a threat; another lowering of standards, or as another 'gimmick', such as audiovisual aids and computerized instruction. I want to show them that they have nothing to fear from the course. I don't want to topple the columns of the temples of learning. I want my students to be able to enter these temples and to worship there according to their needs and dispositions. I want them to join the congregration. To do this we have to show them the way. Literature is not the only goddess in these temples. We graduate scientists, psychologists, sociologists, business administrators, nurses, teachers and policemen. All these students are going to join a society that writes more than any previous one. They will have to write something in their work. Let them learn how to speak and write.

Is my task, then, a reforming one or a revolutionary one, as Dr. Morris suggested? I think it's both. The educational system needs to be reformed,yet many of the methods to reform I will have to do "nothing short of revolution".

FOOTNOTES

1. Carolina Bustamante, Gladys Sigarreta de Santana and Natividad Serra, Español Básico (Santurce, P.R.: University of the Sacred Heart Press, 1981)

2. Richard Young, "Methodizing Nature: Tagmemic Discovery Procedure", (lecture delivered at NEH Institute for Writing in the Humanities, Beaver College, Glenside, Pennsylvania, June 30, 1982)